



# THE MUSEUM OF BAD ART

## MASTERWORKS



MICHAEL FRANK and LOUISE REILLY SACCO

# America's Oddball Museums

By LAUREN MONSEN

Exhibits of bad art, aliens, spy tools, even cockroaches, showcase humor and individuality.

Say the word “museum” and most people envision an art gallery or an institution full of dinosaur bones, historic dioramas and cultural artifacts. However, America is also dotted with museums that pay tribute to the idiosyncrasies of a nation that prizes individuality, creativity and bold ideas.

Oddball museums are very much in the tradition of the roadside attractions that lend humor and character to towns all across the United States.

Here are a few suggestions for tourists who are willing to stray off the beaten path.

Billing itself as “a great monument to the work of unrecognized bad artists everywhere,” the Museum of Bad Art in Dedham, Massachusetts, collects and displays examples of earnest artwork gone horribly wrong. Located in the basement of an old building, “MOBA is appropriately lit by one large, humming, fluorescent light fixture,” the museum’s Web site proudly proclaims.

*Left: The cover of a book featuring 70 works from the permanent collection of the Museum of Bad Art.*

*Above right: Visitors at the International UFO Museum and Research Center in Roswell, New Mexico, next to a flying saucer and alien exhibit during the 2006 UFO Festival.*

*Right: The Oscar Mayer Wienermobile, an automobile shaped like a hot dog, parked outside the SPAM Museum in Austin, Minnesota.*



Reprinted from *Museum of Bad Art: Masterworks* by Michael Frank and Louise Reilly Sacco. Photography by Mark Richards. Copyright © 2008. Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, CA. www.tenspeed.com

ANDREW POERTNER © AP/WIDEWORLD/Record

CHRISTINE V. JOHNSON © AP/WIDEWORLD/Austin Daily Herald

MUSEUMS





Above, from left: A favorite disguise of spies was the homeless person; a coat with a buttonhole camera used by the erstwhile Soviet Union's intelligence agency, KGB, in the 1970s; the ultimate spy car, the Aston Martin DB5 used in the 1964 James Bond thriller Goldfinger; a listening device disguised as a tree stump used by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in the 1970s; a single-shot, 4.5 mm lipstick pistol used by the KGB during the Cold War; and a shoe with a transmitter, microphone and batteries embedded in the heel, used by the KGB in the 1960s to monitor conversations.



The City of Spies exhibit uses post-war Berlin as a backdrop, detailing the Berlin Tunnel, a massive CIA and British wiretap of communication lines between East Berlin's Soviet military headquarters and Moscow; and the Stasi, the secret police of East Germany.

Exhibition  
Continues  
↑ Museum Exit ahead



**For more information:**

Museum of Bad Art

<http://www.museumofbadart.org/>

Museum of Questionable Medical Devices

<http://www.smm.org/exhibitservices/history/collections/gallery/9/>

Vent Haven Ventriloquism Museum

<http://www.venthavenmuseum.net/bio.html>

Liberace Museum

[http://www.liberace.org/liberace\\_biography/](http://www.liberace.org/liberace_biography/)

UFO Museum and Research Center

<http://www.roswellufomuseum.com/>

Cockroach Hall of Fame Museum

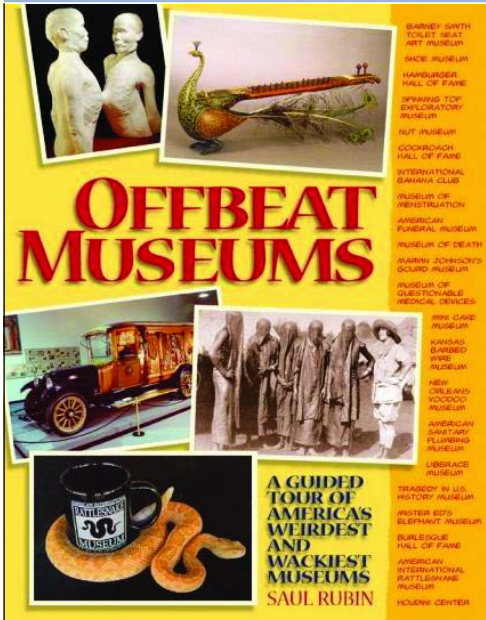
<http://www.pestshop.com/>

International Spy Museum

<http://www.spymuseum.org/>

Book on odd museums

<http://www.blackdogandleventhal.com/products/9781579122560/>



Right: Liberace, in one of his bejeweled costumes.

Almost as diverting as the artwork is the museum's description of each piece, in language that parodies the pretentious prose often found in art criticism (for example, a painting called "Peter the Kitty" is said to be "stirring in its portrayal of feline angst").

St. Paul, Minnesota, is home to the Museum of Questionable Medical Devices. Celebrated as the Quackery Hall of Fame, it has an impressive collection of phrenology machines (which claim to analyze character traits by reading the bumps on a person's



© AP/WWP

head) and hundreds of other contraptions, such as the Nose Straightener, the Battle Creek Vibratory Chair and the MacGregor Rejuvenator, a machine that attempts to reverse the aging process by blasting patients with magnetic waves. The museum—which *The New York Times* calls "a stunning testament to the myriad of ways people have tried to make money off the eternal ills of humankind"—is nestled within its parent institution, the Science Museum of Minnesota.

The Vent Haven Museum in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, houses more than 700 meticulously crafted ventriloquist dummies. Originally used in vaudeville stage acts, films and old television shows, the dummies can be manipulated to wink, roll their eyes, lift their eyebrows, wiggle their noses and ears, smile, cry, spit and salute. Among the many memorable characters inhabiting the museum are Champagne Charlie, a tuxedo-clad dummy that actually smokes a cigarette; a rustic matron called the

Farmer's Wife (also known as Rachel, the Gossip Lady); Elmer Sneezeweed, a figure that appeared in cowboy movies from the 1930s to the 1950s; and Cleo, a glam-or-girl dummy based on actress Marilyn Monroe.

The town of Austin, Minnesota, proudly bears the nickname "Spamtown U.S.A."—not because of any association with junk e-mail, but because Austin is the birthplace of the other type of SPAM: a canned meat product manufactured by the Hormel Foods Corporation. Invented in 1937, SPAM—a processed food made from pork—was fed to Allied troops during World War II, and Hormel officials boasted that their product thus became "the savior of civilization." To honor SPAM's contribution to humanity, Hormel Foods built the SPAM Museum. The facility offers vast quantities of SPAM trivia, a world map indicating which countries consume the most SPAM and a television screen broadcasting the famous skit by the English comedy troupe Monty Python's Flying Circus (featuring Vikings singing a rousing chorus of "SPAM, SPAM, SPAM" that drowns out any

*Below: Michael Bohdan shows off a diorama of roaches relaxing at the beach at the Cockroach Hall of Fame in Plano, Texas. Bohdan displays the exhibits inside his do-it-yourself pest control shop.*

*Below right: Marilyn Monroe, one of the dressed up cockroaches at the Hall of Fame.*

attempt at conversation).

All that glitters may not be gold, but there's no shortage of sparkle at the Liberace Museum in Las Vegas, Nevada. Dedicated to the memory of the flamboyant entertainer and pianist who called himself "Mr. Showmanship," the museum displays Liberace's ornate stage costumes (festooned with sequins, rhinestones and ostrich feathers), his jewelry, lavishly appointed cars (including a Rolls Royce covered in mirrored tiles) and gem-studded pianos. The museum occasionally hosts tribute concerts by Liberace-inspired performers, a concession to fans who still pine for the original. Liberace died in 1987.

Conspiracy theorists will want to investigate the International UFO Museum and Research Center in Roswell, New Mexico. Believers in UFOs—unidentified flying objects—insist they have spotted them flying over Roswell with surprising regularity over the years. Roswell was also the site of a famous incident in 1947, when an object that appeared to be a flying saucer crashed to Earth. The local Air Force base, which was tasked with the cleanup of the crash site, maintained that it was a research balloon, but many UFO proponents believe that story is a cover-up. At the UFO Museum, each room has been designed to evoke the feeling of 1947, with a recreated newsroom, a supposed government "cover-up" room and information about alien sightings in general.

Those who harbor an inner James Bond should pay a visit—surreptitiously, of course—to the International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C. The museum traces the history of espionage through the stories of people who practiced the profession, and visitors are expected to adopt a cover identity, memorize specific details about it and learn firsthand the importance of keeping one's "cover." There is also a collection of authentic tools used by covert agents: the lipstick pistol, referred to as the "kiss of death" by Soviet operatives who used it in the mid-1960s; the shoe with heel transmitter, produced by the Soviets during the Cold War to monitor secret conversations; and the tree-stump listening device created by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in the early 1970s, a solar-powered mechanism disguised as a tree stump that was placed in the woods to capture secret radio transmissions.

Many other quirky museums await the adventurous tourist. From dog sleds to Barbie dolls to dead cockroaches dressed as celebrities and historical figures—as in the Cockroach Hall of Fame Museum in Plano, Texas—there is truly something for everyone.



*Lauren Monsen is an America.gov staff writer.*

*Please share your views on this article. Write to [editorspan@state.gov](mailto:editorspan@state.gov)*



Photographs by MATT SLOCUM © AP/WWP

